

College Student Depression

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College...the best years of our lives...read some Walt Whitman, mix up something fierce in Chem lab, and then go gather the gang, A four-year hiatus from the world in which we study Humanity's best achievements while making life-long friends. There is no other time in life when you can pontificate about how abducting the sculpture in front of the art building is a moral imperative, get unanimous agreement and then assemble a strike team in 10 minutes.

But amidst all the beautiful learning, the tremendous opportunities, the vibrant social life, the scenic campus, 1 in 7 college students suffers from clinical depression. Clinical depression is not the blues from a bad date or the misery of getting a C on a paper you worked hard on. Clinical depression is a serious psychological condition that can take away everything that college and life offers. At its very ugliest, college depression can even lead to college suicides.

I live with a crystal-clear image of something I didn't see. As a college professor at a school for some of the best and brightest, I had a student who committed suicide. In the middle of the night, sober, he walked into the woods, climbed a tree and jumped out with a noose around his neck. Dean's list, Div I soccer player, President of his fraternity, but hanging from a rope when two students found him on their way to Church the next morning. Serious depression can strike anyone, sometimes with the most dire results.

There are roughly three different classes of explanations for college depression – physical, situational, and existential. The physical notes that in just about any population the most common age of onset for depression is late-teens, i.e., college age. In this view, it's not college that is so important but neurotransmitters and their interaction with early adulthood in ways that are still unclear. The situational notes that college is a time of enormous stress – competition for grades, social standing, athletics, and others. It may also be a time when indestructible students drink, take drugs, and don't sleep. Burning the candle on both ends snuffs the flame. The existential view is that freedom and autonomy lead directly to some philosophical issues about individuality. If everything goes wrong in coping with those ideas, a student can feel mortal, alone, and insignificant.

College students cannot usually overcome depression by themselves but there is an enormous amount that parents can do and should know.

- How are the grades?

There can be lots of symptoms of depression, but among college students by far the biggest red flag is grades. There are reasons for getting an F in a class that have nothing to do with depression, but not many. There are no reasons for getting F's in two classes that are not directly related to emotional issues.

- Are you getting divorced?

For the best-intentioned reasons, many unhappy couples stay together until at least some of their children leave the nest. If a student (esp. a Freshman) stops coming to class, I try to get them into my office. I ask “How are things with you?” They say “uh, fine...” I say “How are things at home, say with your parents?” They say nothing for a moment and then maybe a tear “My parents are getting divorced”. You absolutely need to care for your college-age children if you are getting divorced.

- Professors are useless

It’s not a professor’s job to treat or recognize depression. If a professor does more than suggest that a student go to college counseling services, he/she is likely to some derisive speech about “in loco parentis” (Latin can be so disarming) from the student, other students, colleagues, and administrators. A professor’s job is pretty much to give the depressed student an F and get on with his/her teaching and research.

- College counseling services can be very helpful

If a student has reasonably moderate depression, the therapists at college counseling services are quite expert at recognizing it and treating it. Therapists at college counseling services are often brilliant therapists who specialize in treating exactly what is wrong with your child.

- College counseling is inappropriate for severe depression

There are a couple of problems here. First, just about any mention of suicidal thoughts will cause college counseling to hospitalize the student to protect everyone. While this might be the right thing to do, there is a mess to clean up when the student recovers. Next, a severely depressed college student is building a mountain of uncompleted work and poor grades that keeps getting bigger. No amount of counseling can overcome the weight of that pile. A severely depressed student needs to recover at home.

- Nobody can just “get over” depression and get their work done

Telling a depressed student that they need to just get over it and do their work will absolutely make things worse. They can’t but they really wish they could.

- There is no shame in taking a break from college and it is easy to do

Graduating from college exactly four years after graduating from high school is a nice goal that matters very little in the greater scheme of things. If you have a depressed college student home for the holidays, perhaps you need a slight change in your plans. Recovering from depression is vastly more important than maintaining some arbitrary schedule (any financial calculations here are nearly irrelevant because they don’t include the possibility of flunking out of school). Now or nearly anytime in a semester, a call to

the Dean's office saying that the student is suffering from depression and needs to take a break from college will be easier and more successful than you can imagine. The Dean's office can withdraw students from any or all of their classes with no effect on a student's GPA (their transcript will show something like "Withdraw-Medical" or maybe even something more obscure like "WD"). The college will hold the student's spot until they recover. The Dean's office will treat everyone with respect and appropriate sympathy. They do this all the time and they are good at it. Nobody has any interest in punishing a depressed student.

- Depression is treatable

The most likely thing to happen to a student who withdraws from school because of depression and gets proper care (probably including some combination of therapy and medication) is that they return to school a short time later and continue as they were before depression got in the way. They will walk onto campus, see old friends and professors who will smile at them and shake their hands and say "Welcome back". Maybe they will even get a little choked up when they reply "Yes, I'm glad to be back".